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ABSTRACT

The recent United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women concluded that if women are to advance in status socially, economically, and politically, they must have access to high quality education. Although women in the United States have steadily increased their educational status, the fact that 23 percent of women aged 25 and over have not gone beyond high school reveals that, as a group, women are still educationally disadvantaged. Recently, more attention is being given to the needs of women literacy learners in the United States. Georgia State University's Center for the Study of Adult Literacy has begun sponsoring conferences on women and literacy, and Laubach Literacy Action has been providing financial support to programs that empower women and developing a network of programs serving women. A growing literature base supports work with women literacy learners. Although much of the information has been generated abroad (e.g., Canada, Australia, Great Britain), it raises issues that have relevance for programs in the United States, including goals and purposes, rationale for women-only programs, and the status of literacy workers. Contains 19 annotated resources that can be consulted for additional information. Five resource organizations are also listed.) (YLB)

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Women and Literacy
Trends and Issues Alerts

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TRENDS AND ISSUES ALERTS

by Susan Imel

1996

Women and Literacy

The recent United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women concluded that if women are to advance their status socially, economically, and politically, they must have access to high quality education (Albright 1996). Although women in the United States have steadily increased their educational status, millions still have a problem obtaining appropriate education and training because "[r]ace, class, and gender assumptions organize American society in ways that put all women, but especially low-income women, at a disadvantage" (Laubach Literacy Action [LLA], "Facts about Women's Lives" n.d., p. 1). The fact that 23 percent of the women in the United States aged 25 and over have not gone beyond high school (ibid.) reveals that, as a group, women are still educationally disadvantaged.

More than 50% of new enrollments in federally funded adult basic education programs are women (Development Associates 1993), but until recently little attention has been given to the needs of women literacy learners in the United States. Fortunately, that situation is changing. Georgia State University's Center for the Study of Adult Literacy has begun sponsoring conferences on women and literacy. Since 1994, when it began Women in Literacy/USA, LLA has been been providing financial support to programs that empower women as well as developing a network of programs serving women (LLA, "Project Overview" n.d.).

There is also a growing literature base to support work with women literacy learners. Although much of this information has been generated abroad (e.g., Canada, Australia, and Great Britain), it raises issues that have relevance for programs in the United States, including the following:

- **Goals and Purposes**. As described in the literature, the goals and purposes of literacy education for women can be portrayed on a continuum with "maintaining the status quo" at one end and "promoting critical literacy" at the other. Those programs whose primary purpose is to help women function in their traditionally ascribed social roles (i.e., parent, spouse, worker) are viewed as maintaining the status quo, whereas those that help participants develop skills that can be used to question the status of women in society are seen as encouraging critical literacy (e.g., Flint-Coplan 1991; Horsman 1994; Lesirge and Mace 1992; Rockhill 1994). In reality, most programs fall somewhere between the two extremes represented by the ends of the continuum because they have a combination of goals and purposes (e.g., Boudin 1993; Griffin et al. 1993).

- **Women-Only Programs**. Those who support women-only programs e.g., Carmack 1992; Cornes 1994; and van Dijk 1991) do so on the basis that they will help compensate for some of the inequities women have suffered as well as provide an environment in which they can communicate freely. An emerging perspective (e.g., MacKeracher 1993; Shore et al. 1993; Tisdell 1995) suggests that, rather than having separate programs for women, the goal should be to provide an educational environment that is inclusive of both gender and ethnicity.

- **Literacy Workers**. Questions affiliated with the status and role of literacy workers include the following: Why is literacy work not valued? What can literacy workers do about their low status? Is a feminist perspective necessary to achieve the goal of critical literacy? and How can literacy workers understand their own ethnicities better? (Gilding 1994; Norton 1994; and Shore 1994).

The three issues mentioned here are multifaceted and complex, and they raise questions with which program developers must grapple. The resources listed here can be consulted for additional information.

Resources

Albright, M. "The Fourth World Conference: A Success for the World's Women." ***Bringing Beijing Home***. Washington, DC: Women's Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor; President's Interagency Council on Women, The White House, January 1996.
Reviews highlights of Platform for Action, developed at the end of conference.

Boudin, K. "Participatory Literacy Education behind Bars: AIDS Opens the Door." ***Harvard Educational Review*** 63, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 207-232.
The author draws on her background as both an inmate and a literacy educator in a women's correctional facility to describe her experiences incorporating critical literacy teaching practices into a skills-based curriculum.

Carmack, N. A. "Women and Illiteracy: The Need for Gender Specific Programming in Literacy Education." ***Adult Basic Education*** 2, no. 3 (Fall 1992): 176-194.
Examines historical and current background on literacy programs and makes recommendations for gender-specific programming based on theoretical formulations for adult learning that focus on the mental construction of experience as it relates to emancipatory learning.

Cornes, S. "Gender-Engendered Literacy Needs." In ***Worlds of Literacy***, edited by M. Hamilton, D. Barton, and R. Ivanic. Clevedon, Avon, England: Multilingual Matters Ltd.; Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1994.
Author presents arguments for meeting the literacy needs of women by providing women-only groups. A case study that addresses some of the issues outlined is included.

Development Associates. ***Profiles of Client Characteristics. National Evaluation of Adult Education Programs. Second Interim Report***. Arlington, VA: Development Associates, September 1993. (ED 364 125)
Reports the characteristics of new clients in federally funded adult basic and literacy education programs, including age, ethnicity, gender.

Flint-Coplan, B. "Parenting and Literacy." In ***Women, Literacy and Action: A Handbook***, edited by M. Breen. Toronto: Ontario Literacy Coalition, February 1991. (ED 363 755)
By examining some of the commonly held assumptions about parenting (e.g., women should be solely responsible for the care and nurturing of their children), the author questions the focus of many family literacy programs that treat women in terms of a role.

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Gilding, N. "The Struggle for Critical Literacy and Feminist Reform: Some Axioms and Observations." In ***Women's Forum: Gender, Language and Critical Literacy.*** Sydney, Australia: Centre for Language and Literacy, University of Technology, Sydney 1994. (ED 381 629)
Critiques the competency-based movement and the traditional role assumed by many women literacy workers (i.e., "caring and sharing") and argues for the development of a feminist perspective to achieve the goal of critical literacy.

Griffin, C.; Sarcyk, T.; Swarts, T.; and Youngkin, B. "ABE Women: Gaining a New Voice." ***Adult Learning*** 5, no. 2 (November-December 1993): 19-21.
Describes a woman-only class that focuses on learner empowerment.

Horsman, J. "The Problem of Illiteracy and the Promise of Literacy." In ***Worlds of Literacy***, edited by M. Hamilton, D. Barton, and R. Ivanic. Clevedon, Avon, England: Multilingual Matters Ltd; Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1994.
Argues that many literacy and training programs can do little to fulfill the "promise of literacy" represented in the media. Suggests that programs should perform the dual functions of helping women improve their literacy skills while analyzing and critiquing the "promise of literacy."

Laubach Literacy Action. "Women in Literacy/USA: Facts about Women's Lives." Syracuse, NY: LLA, n.d.
Fact sheet on the status of women in the United States as related to education, work, violence, health, and poverty.

Laubach Literacy Action. "Women in Literacy/USA: Project Overview." Syracuse, NY: LLA, n.d.
An overview of Laubach Literacy Action's Women in Literacy/USA project that includes goals, eligibility criteria, and a sample project partnership description.

Lesirge, R., and Mace, J. "Literacy and Return-to-Learning Programs for Women—Shifts in Perspective." In ***Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education. Proceedings of the Annual Conference.*** Guelph, Ontario: Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education, May 1992. (ED 349 467)
Because of the movement to a more vocationalized training agenda, the authors suggest that the developments in women's education made in the early 1980s are more and more difficult to maintain.

MacKeracher, D. "Women as Learners." In ***The Craft of Teaching Adults. Enlarged Edition***, edited by T. Barer-Stein and J. Draper. Toronto, Ontario: Culture Concepts, 1993. (ED 362 644)
Focusing on women as learners, the author reviews ideas that have recently emerged from feminist research and commentary and discusses how adult educators can use these ideas to expand understanding of human learning and to improve approaches to facilitating the learning of both men and women.

Norton, M. "Literacy Work as Women's Work and Other Reasons It Is Undervalued." ***Australian Journal of Adult and Community Education*** 34, no. 1 (April 1994): 71-75.
This review examines four articles about the valuing of women's labor in relationship to the author's and other literacy workers' experiences. Three questions are examined: Why is literacy work not valued? What can literacy workers do about it? and What are some barriers to collective action?

Rockhill, K. "Gender, Language and the Politics of Literacy." In ***Language and Literacy in Social Practice***, edited by J. Maybin. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters, 1994.
Considers how literacy has been constructed as power in discourses of power and contrasts those frames with the ways in which women who cannot read and write English well live literacy and power in their everyday lives.

Shore, S. "Concepts and Practices of Inclusivity: Centring White Ethnicity in Literacy Practice." In ***Women's Forum: Gender, Language and Critical Literacy.*** Sydney, Australia: Centre for Language and Literacy, University of Technology, Sydney 1994. (ED 381 629)
The author describes how work on a project designed to develop inclusive language and numeracy curricula caused her to consider how women like herself (i.e., white, middle-class) need to begin to better understand their own ethnicities in the process of teaching and learning.

Shore, S.; Black, A; Simpson, A.; and Coombe, M. ***Positively Different: Guidance for Developing Inclusive Adult Literacy, Language, and Numeracy Curricula.*** Canberra, Australia: Department of Employment, Education, and Training, 1993. (ED 371 112)
Reports on the results of a project designed to produce guidelines for developing gender-inclusive, ethnic-inclusive, and nonageist materials in adult literacy curricula and to develop examples of adult literacy curricula exemplary in the use of nonsexist, nonageist, and nonracist material.

Tisdell, E. J. ***Creating Inclusive Adult Learning Environments: Insights from Multicultural Education and Feminist Pedagogy.*** Columbus: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, 1995. (ED 384 872)
Synthesizes literature related to inclusivity and diversity in adult education and examines aspects of the wider multicultural education and feminist theory and pedagogy literature that offers insights specifically for creating inclusive adult learning environments.

van Dijk, F. "Do We Need Separate Literacy Courses for Women?" In ***World without Writing, and Then . . . They Write for the First Time***, edited by R. Aspeslagh and J. VandenBerg. The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations, February 1991. (ED 353 366)
By comparing the autonomous model of literacy (that which presents the consequence of literacy in terms of economic progress or cognitive improvement) with the ideological model of literacy (that which suggests that literacy is multilevel and embedded in whole cultures), the author argues for separate literacy courses for women.

Organizations

Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women, 47 Main Street, Toronto, Ontario M4E 2V6, Canada, (416) 699-1909

Center for the Study of Adult Literacy, Georgia State University, University Plaza, Atlanta, GA 30303-3083; (404) 651-2405

ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, 1900 Kenny Road, Columbus, OH 43210-1090; (614) 292-4353 or (800) 848-4814, ext. 4-7686; E-mail: ericacve@magnus.acs.ohio-state.edu

Laubach Literacy Action, 1320 Jamesville Avenue, Box 131, Syracuse, NY 13210; (315) 422-9121

Wider Opportunities for Women, 815 15th Street, NW, Suite 916, Washington, DC 20005; (202) 638-3143

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